

Fatal Environment: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and American Culture

Staking a Claim: Exploring the Global Reach of *Buffy*

Only truly radical alterations of the images of hero and universe effect significant changes at the narrative structural level of the myth, for such changes (by definition) reflect a fundamental alteration of the culture's conception of the relationship of man to the universe, a revolution in world view, cosmology, historical and moral theory, and self-concept. Hence such changes may be seen as marking the point at which a new epoch of cultural history or perhaps even a new culture can be said to begin.

Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence* (9)

In a recent largely negative review in *The Village Voice* of Jim South's *Buffy and Philosophy: Fear and Loathing in Sunnydale*, the always provocative American critic Howard Hampton draws on D. H. Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature* in order to read *Buffy*. "It's easy to see *Buffy* in Lawrencian terms," Hampton suggests,

even as its females-on-top end-of-the-worldview relentlessly inverts [Lawrence's] dour male chauvinism and turns his apocalyptic apoplexy on its purple head. (Amusingly, too, her generic California hometown is chronically awash in fugitives from Old England and Ireland, stowaways from the 18th or 19th centuries, slouching toward Sunnydale to be reborn in Mall-America.) It was virtually predestinated that the finest single episode of this absurd, self-divided, utterly mad American classic—as if for Lawrence there could be any other kind—would be titled "The Body." That is where this novelistic TV series' acute, D.H.L.-ish "spirit of place" is absolutely rooted, in the flesh of an undiscovered country, in the physical's knock-down drag-out, love/hate affair with the soul, life instinct and death wish commingling as tidal pools in the supposedly metaphoric Hellmouth's tooth-and-maw war zone.

Hampton's coupling of Lawrence and *Buffy*—a pairing which suggests that critics, too, enjoy Slashing as much as fanfic authors—seemed like a natural place for me to begin my talk here today. For we all share an interest in *Buffy*, of course; Lawrence

himself, forever the wanderer adrift from his native England, was at one time obsessed with both my native land (where he is buried) and that other former British colony where we meet today); and Hampton raises a question not often considered as yet in the burgeoning field of *Buffy Studies*,¹ the topic of my own talk last week at Sonic Synergies: just how American is *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*?²

We seldom remember that television series are products of a place and a time. *Twin Peaks*, for example, was, like it or not, a phenomenon of the first Bush administration, *The X-Files* a Clinton-era cultural artifact. When “Welcome to the Hellmouth,” the first episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, debuted on March 10th, 1997, President Clinton was still in the White House and had not yet met Monica. The month before O. J. Simpson was found liable for the murders of his wife and Ron Goldman in a civil suit. That same month the Heaven’s Gate cult committed mass suicide. Only two weeks before the second season of *Buffy* began on September 15th, 1997, Princess Diana was killed in a car accident in Paris. The same month (January 1998) that Buffy had sex for the first time with Angel, the perfect moment that resulted transforming him into the soulless Angelus, Bill Clinton insisted in public that he “did not have sex with that woman.” In the same month, January 1999, that Buffy lost her powers in a Watcher’s Council test of The Slayer on her 18th birthday, the Euro was born. Almost simultaneously with the invasion of Sunnydale by The Gentleman in November, 1999, US Judge Thomas Penfield Jackson ruled that Microsoft Corporation is a monopoly and has wielded its power to stifle competition. About the time that Dracula visited Sunnydale in September the 2000 Summer Olympics came to an end in Sydney Australia. Almost simultaneously with Buffy’s death in “The Gift” on May 22, 2001, Timothy McVeigh, the American terrorist who had bombed the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, was scheduled for execution by legal injection, but the execution was postponed until June 11. Only three weeks lethal injection, Buffy was brought back from the grave on October 1, 2001, high-jacked 747s crashed into the World Trade Center in New York, destroying both towers and killing thousands. As the war with The First moved into its final stages, culminating in the Battle of Sunnydale High on May 20th, 2003, the United States and a small “Coalition of the Willing” invaded Iraq and deposed Saddam Hussein.

In *Tokyo-Ga*, a 1985 documentary tribute to the great Japanese auteur Ozu, director Wim Wenders pays a visit to a television assembly line. The German

expatriate filmmaker, having just finished a long sojourn in the United States, muses on Japan's then complete dominance of the industry. "The Japanese," he observes, "make all the TVs, but the Americans make all the images." Now, in the 21st Century, the Japanese no longer have a monopoly on television production, but American images continue to empower, all over our "Jihad vs. MacWorld" planet, our cultural imperialism. Along with weaponry, popular culture remains our most important product. The 144 episodes (5760 minutes, 96 hours) of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* are now a permanent contributor to my nation's hegemonic PC exports. But to what degree is *Buffy* an American product? William Irwin Thompson calls the period in which we live "the Los Angelization of planet earth" (*At the Edge of History*). Is it the Sunnydaleization as well?

That *Buffy* is an international phenomenon is beyond doubt. Obsessed Japanese *Twin Peaks* devotees helped decrease America's trade deficit by journeying to the States to see where Laura Palmer's body had washed up on the shore of a lake, "wrapped in plastic," to eat in the Double R Diner, to stay at the Great Northern Hotel. To the best of my knowledge, no travel agents is yet organizing tours of the Hellmouth, but the global reach of *Buffy* is not in question. That we are gathered here in Adelaide, Australia to talk seriously about an American television show with a smirkable name testifies to its prominence, as did the overwhelming interest the conveners of *Blood, Text and Fears: Reading Around Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in Norwich, England experienced last fall, as does the over two hundred and fifty published essays and over a dozen published or in-development books, as do the hundreds of fan websites, as does a plethora of fan fic. *Buffy* is a phenomenon for both fans and scholars in the UK and New Zealand, Germany and France, Sweden, Canada, and Italy.

And yet the wider world intrudes into the relatively closed, relatively isolationist Buffyverse only infrequently, and when it does it almost always signifies trouble for the Scooby Gang. Those African hyenas in the Sunnydale Zoo ("The Pack") can transpossess (with the collaboration of a zookeeper). When an exchange student, Ampata, arrives from Latin America in "Inca Mummy Girl," she turns out to be a life-force-feeding ancient mummy. The British Invasion of Spike and Drusilla in "School Hard"—"Me and Dru, we're movin' in."—introduces us to two of the series' most ingenious villains. When Joyce Summers hangs an African tribal mask on the wall at 1630 Revello Drive in "Dead Man's Party," it leads to a plague of zombie humans and cats. The arrival of Gypsy uncle Enyos (in "Surprise") does not bode well for the fate

of Jenny Callendar. The demon who ushers in chaos and brings about the founding of MOO in “Gingerbread” is European in origin, as are his fairy tale minions Hansel and Gretel. Dracula visits Sunnydale to meet the famous Buffy (“Why else would I come here?,” he asks. “For the sun?”) and disrupts the Scooby Gang until “Eurotrashed” by Buffy. When, at the very beginning of Season Seven, an establishing shot identifies the locale as “Istanbul,” we just know that nothing good can come of such an exotic, un-American place, and our fears are confirmed when we witness a SIT murdered by a Bringer. *Buffy* nevertheless remains distinctly American. Though hardly xenophobic—the Buffyverse is, after all, full of “aliens” some of whom become “useful members of society”—it does fly an American flag. Allow me to count the ways.

We know we are in America when *Buffy* recalls Gertrude Stein’s famous characterization of her native land’s placelessness.³ In “Primeval,” Willow (in computer hacker mode) and Buffy inspect the blue prints for The Initiative in search of Adam’s headquarters **[show clip]**:

Willow: Done. Hold on. According to this, there's air ducts and electrical conduits (cut to the screen) all running into there.

Buffy: So?

Willow: So, there's no there there. Look.

We know we are in America when *Buffy* borrows from, references, quotes distinctly American film and American formulae. When “Ted” recalls *The Stepford Wives* (1975), or “Dead Man’s Party” brings to mind *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), or “The Zeppo” takes its name from the little known fourth Marx Brother; or “Restless” brilliantly parodies *Apocalypse Now* (Xander as Captain Willard; Principal Snyder as Colonel Kurtz), or “Once More with Feeling” evokes a whole slew of Hollywood and Broadway (Sondheim) musicals; or “Bargaining” demonizes *The Wild One* (1953)

Being American, *Buffy*, of course, goes to the mall, for nothing is more American than “the malling of America” **[if possible show website]**. It is at the mall that Buffy battles Lyle Gorch in the bowels of a shopping center in “Bad Eggs”; it is at the mall where Buffy wields her borrowed rocket launcher and destroys “Big Blue,” aka The Judge in “Innocence” **[show clip]**:

Cut to the Judge. He takes a couple of steps down. A customer squeezes

by Angelus and heads down the stairs branching to the left. A young couple comes up on the right. The Judge extends his arms, and his energy arcs out to and through them. Cut to a shot of the stairs from the refreshment stand. The Judge's energy arcs through everyone in the area. They all freeze where they stand. Cut to the Judge. He smiles widely. Angelus and Drusilla enjoy the show.

Drusilla: (bouncing with glee) Oh, goody!

Suddenly a crossbow bolt hits the Judge in the chest and breaks his concentration. The arcs of energy disappear, and the people are all dazed. The Judge grabs at the bolt and pulls it from his chest.

Judge: Who dares?

Angelus and Drusilla look over at the refreshment stand. Cut to the stand. The camera pans up from the floor, past Willow, Oz, Giles and Cordelia, past Xander opening the crate and up to Buffy standing on top, holding the crossbow.

Buffy: Think I got his attention.

Judge: You're a fool. (cut to him) No weapon forged can stop me.

Buffy: (cut to her) (lowers the bow) That was then.

Xander hands her the weapon from the box, and she raises the anti-tank rocket launcher to her shoulder.

Buffy: This is now.

She powers it on. Angelus and Drusilla exchange a look. Buffy sets her sights and opens the trigger guard. The rest of the team takes cover behind the snack counter. Angelus and Drusilla begin to run. Buffy takes aim. The Judge just looks at her. Angel and Drusilla leap over the stair railing. Buffy is ready.

Judge: What's that do?

Buffy pulls the trigger and the rocket flies straight into the Judge's chest as Angelus and Drusilla fly over the railing. The Judge disappears in an explosion of flame and smoke. The people in the mall scream and start to panic and run. Angelus and Drusilla hit the floor below. Bits of charred Judge fall all around them. Buffy looks up from the rocket launcher's sights and looks over at them in satisfaction. Angelus gets up and runs off. Drusilla freaks out and runs the other way. The team

looks over the counter at what's left of the Judge. The smoke cloud from the explosion billows its way up to the ceiling.

Though the mall doesn't appear with great regularity, it is there at the end of the series, and is given its proper encomium **[shop clip]**:

Dawn: We destroyed the mall? I fought on the wrong side.

Xander: All those shops gone. The Gap, Starbucks, Toys "R" Us. Who will remember all those landmarks unless we tell the world about them? ("Chosen," 7022)

When a superhero has to take a minimum wage job at a fast food restaurant, as Buffy does in Season Six, and wear grotesque/surreal head gear, just to make ends meet we know we are in America **[show clip]**:

BUFFY: It's you.

RILEY: It's me.

BUFFY: You're here.

RILEY: I know.

BUFFY: And ... were you always this tall?

RILEY: (leans closer) Look, this isn't the way I wanted it. But something's come up, something big. We don't have much time. You understand?

BUFFY: (nodding) Not a work you've said so far.

RILEY: Right. I should have known, anticipated. You're working.

Longer shot of the restaurant interior. There are a few customers waiting in line behind Riley. Buffy is the only person working the counter.

Cut back to close shot.

BUFFY: Well, just counter, not grill any more.

RILEY: I want to explain, I just don't have time. I've been up for 48 hours straight tracking something bad, and now it's come to Sunnydale.

BUFFY: My hat has a cow.

RILEY: (sighs) I know that I'm putting you on the spot, showing up like this, but ... but you know, here we are. I need the best. I need you, Buffy. (Buffy staring at him) Can you help me?

Todd appears, sticks his face next to Buffy's.

TODD: Hellooo, Buffy? People are waiting.

Buffy and Riley stare at each other, oblivious to Todd.

Buffy takes off her Double Meat hat, puts it down, grabs a black coat from under the counter, and comes out from behind the counter to join Riley.

TODD: Buffy, uh ... Buffy! Wait! Buffy!

Buffy follows Riley out.

When a “solitary, mysterious” young man who “hardly talks to anyone” and “can brood for forty minutes straight,” loves the poetry of his “security blanket” Emily Dickinson, we must be in United States. Hoping to make a good impression, Buffy intently announcing her own clueless fondness for “Emily Dickens.” When Buffy later discusses the Nun of Amherst with Giles, she finds herself irritated by what she takes to be her Watcher’s sexism but turns out instead to be the product of an historical British/American tension **[show clip]**:

Giles: Oh, Emily Dickinson.

Buffy: We're both fans.

Giles: Yes, uh, she's quite a good poet, I mean for a . . .

Buffy: A girl?

Giles: For an American.

In 1837 Ralph Waldo Emerson had proffered his intellectual “Declaration of Independence” from Britain, the famous “American Scholar” address. A few years later the Sage of Concord would issue a concomitant call for a distinctly American poetry, but in this, only the fifth episode of *Buffy*, a still officious and not yet-Americanized Giles (“He was a curator at some British museum,” Willow proudly explains, “or, or The British Museum”) seems not to have gotten the memo.

We know we are in America when *Buffy* requires our participation in all kinds of school rituals familiar to any of us who have survived the American education system (as well as those who have not): talent shows in “The Puppet Show” (creeped

up by the involvement of a demon and a living dummy); Spring Fling in “Prophecy Girl” (interrupted by The Master’s rising); parent-teacher night in “School Hard” (spoiled by Spike’s full-fledged assault on Sunnydale High); a career fair in “What’s My Line” Parts I and II (made chaotic by the appearance of Kendra the Vampire Slayer and the Order of Taraka’s Spike-ordered assassination attempts on Buffy); a Sadie Hawkins dance in “I Only Have Eyes for You” (ruined by an infestation of poltergeist); fund-raising candy sales in “Band Candy” (turned disastrous by Ethan Rayne’s scheming on the behalf of The Mayor); homecoming in “Homecoming” (which unfortunately coincides with Slayerfest 98); the SATs in “Lovers Walk” (the occasion for Spike’s return to the Hellmouth); the senior prom in “The Prom” (hounded by Hell Hounds with a Skinnerian hatred for formalwear); and, of course, graduation in “Graduation Day,” Parts I and II (aka “The Ascension”).

When the Buffyverse comes to include not only student violence against classmates—Andrew’s brother Tucker, who unleashes the Hellhounds (“The Prom”) and workplace violence—a cafeteria lady who tries to “kill them all” by putting rat poison in the jello (“Earshot”), but a potential slaughter of students and faculty by a major civic figure (the later two episodes were pulled by the WB in the wake of the Columbine shootings),⁴ where else could we be but in America, the land that invented going postal?

Whenever that quintessentially American writer of eldritch horror with just a dash of local color H. P. Lovecraft is invoked, we know very well where the horror is coming from. When, in “The Harvest,” Giles explains to Buffy, Xander, and Willow, offering the audience as well the Buffyverse creation myth, that “This world is older than any of you know. Contrary to popular mythology, it did not begin as a paradise. For untold eons demons walked the Earth. They made it their home, their . . . their Hell. But in time they lost their purchase on this reality. The way was made for mortal animals, for, for man. All that remains of the old ones are vestiges, certain magicks, certain creatures . . . ,” the Buffyverse, with its “New World-confronts-ye-Old Gods self-consciousness” (Hampton) reveals itself to be at base Lovecraftian, though far more new-agey.

Any television show with a Thanksgiving episode has to be American, but the Buffy-version (“Pangs” in Season Four) results in a guilt-ridden PC-handicapped battle with Hus, a Native American spirit that almost spoils the annual “ritual sacrifice, with pie,” the “sham with yams” and a lecture from Spike on why conquerors shouldn’t feel culpable.

We know we are the in US of A whenever *Buffy* speaks (as it does incessantly) “in jokey, stammering, polyglottal tongues” (Hampton). The quintessential American language of Slayerspeak is so rich and quotable that it needs a 300 page Oxford University Press book, Michael Adams’ brilliant new study, to do it justice.

Buffy is quintessentially American when the oldest of Old World vampires adapts the technique of mass production **[show clip]**:

Cut to the Master's factory. The camera pans from a control panel across the crowd of gathering vampires, past a wooden cage full of humans and the machine waiting in front of it, and over to the Master up on a stage.

Master: Vampires, come! Behold the technical wonder, which is about to alter the very fabric of our society. Some have argued that such an advancement goes against our nature. They claim that death is our art. I say to them...

Well, I don't say anything to them because I kill them. Undeniably we are the world's superior race. (the camera closes in on him) Yet we have always been too parochial, too bound by the mindless routine of the predator. Hunt and kill, hunt and kill. Titillating? Yes. Practical? Hardly. Meanwhile, the humans, with their plebeian minds, have brought us a truly demonic concept: (spreads his arms) mass production!

“The distinctive vice of the new world,” Nietzsche observed in *The Gay Science*, “is already beginning to infect old Europe with its ferocity and is spreading a lack of spirituality like a blanket. **[Nietzsche, recall, was writing in 1881.]** Even now one is ashamed of resting, and prolonged reflection almost gives people a bad conscience. One thinks with a watch in one's hand, even as one eats one's midday meal while reading the latest news of the stock market; one lives as if one always might ‘miss out on something.’” We know we are in America when Nietzsche’s anti-Americanism finds confirmation even in the midnight meal of “The Wish’s” alternate universe.

And we know we are in America, the land of the couch potato, when a just-reanimated corpse (in “The Zeppo”) must ask a very important first question upon rejoining the living **[show clip]**:

Xander: Are, um... Are all your friends dead?

Jack: (over his shoulder) Xander, let's roll.

Bob: How long I been down?

Jack: Eight months. I had to wait till the stars aligned.

Bob: Oh, eight months. I got some catching up to do.

He stops in his tracks and points at Jack.

Bob: Whoa! *Walker, Texas Ranger*. You been taping 'em?

Jack: Every ep.

His honor The Mayor, Richard Wilkins, the century-old, anal-compulsive, Americana loving, profanity-averse, anxious to ascend, soul-selling founder of Sunnydale, couldn't be more American. Whether discussing comics in "Bad Girls"

[show clip]:

Mayor Wilkins: (smiles up at Trick) Do you like *Family Circus*?

Trick: (seriously) I like *Marmaduke*.

Mayor Wilkins: (disgusted) Oh! (shivers) Eww! He's always on the furniture.
Unsanitary.

Trick: Nobody can tell Marmaduke what to do. (grins) That's my kinda dog.

Allan: (smiling eagerly) I like to read *Cathy*.

Mr. Trick and the Mayor both give him a look. Allan swallows nervously.

or playing miniature golf in "Enemies" **[show clip]:**

Daylight. In the Mayor's office. Across from him sits a mage concealed behind Bedouin robes. Only his eyes and upper nose are visible. The eyes seem serpentine.

Mayor: Mint? Didn't think so. Well, scheduling a man of your talents is quite the chore, I'll tell you. Between the chanting and the sacrifice, oh, my golf game is shot. But heere you are. You know why I've summoned you. Can you do it? (Mage nods) Need anything from me? (Mage shakes his head)

Mage: You have risked great danger in calling on me. The deadliest magics are needed to rob this creature of its soul.

Mayor: Big job alright.

Mage: And so it shall be done.

Mayor: Oh, that's just swell. Listen, you sure you don't want any? Cause they're, they're low calorie. Okay.

or eating Gavrock spiders in “Graduation Day,” Part I **[show clip]**:

In the Mayor's office. One of the Gavrok bugs is pinned, unmoving, to his desk with a knife. The camera pans up to show two of the legs sticking out of the Mayor's mouth. He chews and swallows. A vampire looks on uncertainly.

Mayor: Mmm. My god, what a feeling. The power of these creatures. It suffuses my being. I can feel the changes begin. My organs are shifting, changing, making ready for the Ascension. Plus these babies are high in fiber. And what's the fun in becoming an immortal demon if you're not regular, am I right?

A second vampire bursts into the room.

Mayor: We don't knock during dark rituals?

or keeping track of his “To Do” list in “Bad Girls” **[show clip]**:

Mayor Wilkins: Okay. Now we're ready.

Trick steps around to the front of the cage, unlocks the padlock and removes the chains. The Mayor watches and waits calmly. Trick pulls open the door, and Vincent rushes out, heading straight for the Mayor. He raises his sword high and brings it down hard on the Mayor's head, slicing it in two. Amazingly, he does not bleed. The flesh inside just shimmers as Vincent pulls back his sword. The two halves of the Mayor's head pull toward each other and seal themselves together. He stands before Vincent as though he was completely untouched. Vincent can't believe his eyes and backs away. Mr. Trick waits behind him and stakes him through the back. He explodes into ashes.

Mayor Wilkins: Well!

He reaches into his jacket, pulls out his daily planner and opens it to today's list. Some of the things included are:

- Greet Scouts
- Lumber Union Reschedule
- Call Temp Agency
- Become Invincible
- Meeting With PTA
- Haircut

He puts a check mark next to "Become Invincible" and puts the planner away.
Trick comes up to him.

or about to become mayor meat **[show clip]:**

Cut to the hall: Buffy opens the door and runs in. The Mayor barrels down the door and some of the surrounding wall as he pursues her. Buffy keeps running towards the library while the Mayor tears through the school like a freight train. Buffy runs into the library, vaults a banister looking back at the Mayor. The Mayor looks around the library and sees the barrels of diesel fuel and bags of fertilizer stacked everywhere. Buffy keeps running and jumps out of a window. Cut to the Mayor looking around and growling.

Mayor (in his own voice that sounds like it is coming from the bottom of a rain barrel): "Well, gosh."

we are in the presence of an American original, a type satirized by Sinclair Lewis and e. e. cummings, a type still ruling the roost at every Rotary Club, and in many bureaucracies in America today.

We know are on the road in America when the chosen vehicle of The Chosen in her flight from the bitch god Glory (in "Spiral") is a gas-guzzling recreational vehicle named after a native American tribe **[show clip]:**

Cut to: city street, day. Willow and Tara sit on a bench while Giles, Anya, and Xander stand. They all have bags of stuff and are watching the cars go by.

ANYA: Anybody else feel that?

WILLOW: What?

ANYA: Cold draft of paralyzing fear.

GILES: We just need to stay calm.

WILLOW: (skeptical) Calm, right.

XANDER: Hey, we gotta be like Sergeant Rock. Cool and collected in the face of overwhelming odds.

ANYA: **Over**whelming? (turns to him) How much more than whelming would that be exactly?

GILES: Look, everything will be all right, we just need to stay here calmly. As soon as Buffy arrives-

A large Winnebago (RV, motor home) drives up and screeches to a halt in front of them. The windows are all covered with aluminum foil. The door swings open.

GILES: -we'll feel oddly worse.

They all pick up their stuff and climb into the Winnebago.

Cut to inside. Looking from the driver's seat back, on the left there's a small kitchen area with sink; on the right, a booth with a table. Farther back there's a door leading into a back bedroom.

Willow and Anya look with interest at the driver's area as they and Tara move to sit around the table. We see Buffy sitting at the table already, studying maps.

Giles and Xander enter. Giles looks at the driver's area too, does a double-take.

We see Spike sitting in the driver's seat, wearing a large pair of black goggles.

(Perhaps you didn't know that it is an American habit to name recreational vehicles and suburban subdivisions after the indigenous peoples who were the beneficiaries of Manifest Destiny's genocidal tendencies?) On this RV Spike "nicked" instead of a more attractive (and more European) Porsche, the Scooby Gang will ride into battle against The Knights of Byzantium, a decidedly Old World order which looks very out of place against a SoCal backdrop **[show clip]:**

Gregor and Dante stare at Orlando.

GREGOR: The monks, they've made it human.

DANTE: We know the Slayer's protecting the key. If what Orlando says is true...

Gregor turns back to the bushes. We see a large number of knights standing in formation. One knight stands closer, guarding.

GREGOR: Prepare to advance!

KNIGHT: Yes sir.

GREGOR: (turns back) We end this now.

He stalks off with the knights following. The camera rises so we can see them emerging from the trees. Some are on foot, some on horseback. Hard to tell exactly how many there are, but there are a lot.

We know we are in America when Caleb, The First's right-hand-man, is introduced in Season Seven (in "Dirty Girls" [7018]). His appearance in the garb of a priest raised some hackles. Played by Nathan Fillion, Caleb would last not quite five episodes but would leave a lasting impression [**show clip**]:

CALEB: They called you. You know why? Because you're human. (walks around her) You got your urges. A woman's got hers. A man's got his. Our whole race can be do damnably weak... (walks back toward the shadow) That's why we seek the strength, the power.

HELPLESS GIRL: It's not wrong to be drawn to the power, is it, preacher? (follows him into the shadow)

CALEB: Oh, no, child. It's not wrong... (the girl gasps and falls to the ground, revealing a bloody stomach wound) Just human.

The girl's body transforms into Buffy's form.

BUFFY/FIRST: (stands) Most people don't like visits from their dead, you know.

CALEB: Heathens. No appreciations for life's pleasures. Do it again.

BUFFY/FIRST: I take requests. (crosses arms) One of those potentials you killed, perhaps?

CALEB: No, save them for later. I'm in more of an old memory lane kind of mood. Back before I met you, there was this choir girl in Knoxville I used to give singing lessons to...why, she even screamed on key. Show me her.

BUFFY/FIRST: (shakes her head) All these girls...they followed you willingly. You tricked them.

CALEB: I only told them the truth. As for following, well, that seems to be what they do best

A colleague of mine, thinking perhaps of Manley Pointer in “Good Country People,” would describe Caleb as “a Flannery O’Connor character from hell,” but this monstrous clergyman from my home state—an allegiance as controversial in Tennessee and the South in general as his religious affiliation—owes perhaps more to the diabolical Reverend Harry Powell (as played by Robert Mitchum) in Charles Laughton’s masterful *Night of the Hunter* (1955) [if possible, show website].

And, last but not least, we know we are in America when the key moment in the activation of all the Potentials in *Buffy’s* final episode swings away. In a powerful and moving montage we watch a series of young women transformed, imbued with the full power of the Slayer, and first and last comes a young girl at bat in America’s national pastime, its most metaphoric field of dreams, in a baseball game, a young girl with a smile of confidence on her face which speaks volumes.

<p>EXT. BASEBALL DIAMOND - DAY A young woman stands at the plate staring at the pitcher, waiting to bat. She looks a little nervous.</p>	<p>BUFFY (V.O.) From now on, every girl in the world who might be a slayer...</p>
<p>INT. HIGH SCHOOL HALLWAY - DAY A young woman breathes heavily as she leans on her locker for support.</p>	<p>will be a slayer.</p>
<p>INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY A young woman is lying across the floor, having fallen out of her chair.</p>	<p>Every girl who could have the power...</p>
<p>INT. DINING ROOM - DAY In a Japanese-style dining room, a young woman stands up at family dinner.</p>	<p>will have the power... can stand up,</p>
<p>INT. BASEMENT - DAY A young woman grabs the wrist of a man who's trying to slap her face, preventing him.</p>	<p>will stand up.</p>
<p>EXT. BASEBALL DIAMOND - DAY The girl at the plate changes from nervous to confident, smiling as she waits for the pitch.</p>	<p>Slayers . . . every one of us. Make your choice. Are you ready to be strong?</p>

I hope I have succeeded today in raising our consciousness of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as an “absurd, self-divided, utterly mad *American* classic” (to again quote Hampton; my italics), But I have not accomplished—haven’t even really begun—what I must confess was my original goal, and so I end with a mea culpa. As my title still hints, I really wanted to begin to read *Buffy* through the critical lens provided by Richard Slotkin, a major figure in American studies, author of *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America*, and *Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890*, whose complex examination of American “mythogenesis” would provide a superb method for examining any major or minor work of popular culture even if he had not been one of the teachers of a certain 1987 graduate of Wesleyan University in Connecticut in 1987.

Already intrigued by the undocumented passing mention of journalists Ken Tucker (in *Entertainment Weekly’s* special issue on *Buffy*) and Laura Miller (in *Salon.com*) that Slotkin had been a strong influence on Whedon,⁵ I wrote Slotkin myself to inquire. In an exchange of e-mails, he confirms being Whedon’s teacher. Last month he offered the following recollection:

He was my student in American Studies and in Film. The course he often refers to was titled “Introduction to Myth and Popular Culture,” and we read my own work on American myth, also Joseph Campbell, and primary readings in a variety of popular genres ranging from the novels of Cooper to dime novels and modern film genres.

You will understand, I hope, why I have not yet followed that lead, though you may well be disappointed that I have not at least cracked open the book that would inevitably result if an academic set out to study the influence of a fellow academic on the creator of a much beloved work of popular culture.

So let me just whet your appetite by quoting a single line from Slotkin’s *Fatal Environment* before (“**GRR . . . ARG**”) I come to an end, and please bear in mind that it is General George Armstrong Custer Slotkin is describing here, not Buffy the Vampire Slayer, and the pun must surely be coincidental.

They knew he had gone to conquer a mythic region whose wildness made it at once a region of darkness and an earthly paradise, a goad to civilization and a

barrier to it, whose hidden magic was to be tapped only by self-reliant individualists, capable of enduring the lonesome reach; whose riches were held by a dark and savage enemy with whom white Americans must fight a war to the knife, **with the future of civilization as the stake.** (11-12).

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¹ The talk I just delivered at Sonic Synergies, Creative Cultures examined the field of *Buffy Studies*.

²² Two published essays which consider the subject do exist: Catherine Siemann's "Darkness Falls on the Endless Summer: *Buffy* as Gidget for the Fin de Siècle," and Boyd Tonkin's "Entropy as Demon: *Buffy* in Southern California."

³ "There is no there there," Stein observes of her hometown of Oakland, California in *Everybody's Autobiography* (1937).

⁴ For an excellent, highly critical discussion of the WB's decision, see Taylor.

⁵ "Whedon has also referred in interviews to *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American frontier, 1600-1800*," Tucker writes,

a 1973 tome thick enough to repel an oncoming wooden stake. The author, Richard Slotkin, refers to "mythogenesis," the creation, "in both maker and audience, [of tales that are] mystical and religious, drawing heavily on the unconscious and the deepest levels of the psyche, defining relationships between human and divine things, between temporalities and ultimates." (23)

And Miller adds the following:

"An early influence on Whedon was Richard Slotkin, a novelist, historian and professor of American studies at Wesleyan University. In his 1992 book, "Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in 20th-Century America," Slotkin surveys hundreds of westerns -- films, books, radio and TV shows -- and notes the emergence of a particular kind of American hero after the fading of the New Deal. This hero, the lone gunfighter, is cut off from the very community he defends. The eponymous character played by Alan Ladd in "Shane," for example, rides into a small town, saves it from the depredations of a wicked cattle baron, but rides out again afterward, unable to enjoy the peace and prosperity he helped secure. His special ability as a gunfighter obligates him to rescue the weak and the good, but his involvement with violence prevents him from forming real relationships with them. They need him, but he can never be with or of them. His chief traits are, in Slotkin's words, "his loneliness, his skill, his fatal celebrity."

The glamorized alienation of the gunfighter carries over into the hard-boiled detectives of noir and, of course, the superheroes of comic books who, like *Buffy*, are supposed to conceal their secret crime-fighting identities from those acquainted with their workaday selves. But from the very beginning,

Buffy could not keep her mission to herself. In addition to her assigned Watcher, Giles (Anthony Head), she quickly acquired allies in Willow and Xander, who in turn drew others into the Scooby gang. The traditional American male hero wallows in romanticized isolation, a condition supposedly forced upon him, but one that also conveniently caters to an aversion to connection and intimacy.